

Texas A&M University

Graduate Student Ombuds Services
Annual Report
2020-2021

Introduction

Role of the Ombuds Officer

The Ombuds Officer advocates for the fair processes of graduate education and provides equal, open access to all parties: graduate and professional students, staff, faculty, and administrators. The university is a large and complex institution, and graduate and professional students often play multiple roles (e.g., student, research collaborator, teacher, technician, and peer). Misunderstandings and conflicts can arise in any one of these roles. Having a confidential conversation with an Ombuds Officer can be a first step for visitors who do not know where to turn. The Ombuds Officer serves as an informal, independent, neutral, and confidential resource for persons to discuss questions and concerns related to graduate education.

The Graduate and Professional Student Ombuds Officer is guided and informed by the [Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#) of the International Ombudsman Association. The Ombuds Officer promotes the University mission of excellence in graduate education by providing a service to support and facilitate environments in which graduate students can thrive and prosper.

Mandatory Reporter

The Ombuds Office values and protects the privacy and identity of students seeking assistance. Confidential communication is not disclosed unless required by state law. In addition, per Texas A&M System Regulation 08.01.01, Ombuds Officers are considered Mandatory Reporters and are required to report any alleged sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, stalking, discrimination, or any other prohibited conducted committed by or against a person who was a student or employee at the time of the incident. Ombuds Officers are also obligated to report discrimination based on a protected status.

Meeting with an Ombuds Officer

Individuals can make an appointment with the Ombuds Officer through the Graduate School at ombuds@tamu.edu. In person, phone, and Zoom appointments are available. In some cases, the visitor and Ombuds Officer identify a solution after one visit. More complicated cases often involve multiple visits.

In response to COVID-19 and following university guidelines, appointments continued to be conducted on Zoom or by phone. In-person appointments were provided when requested by the student.

Potential Topics of Conversation

Visitors discuss several topics with the Ombuds Officer, including but not limited to:

- Academic related issues, such as grade disputes, testing procedures, and instructor-student misunderstandings.
- Intellectual property.
- Interpersonal conflicts, lab politics, and problems with workplace climate.
- Professional ethics.

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- Advice on how to have difficult conversations.
- Concerns about procedural fairness or due process.
- Conflicts between graduate students and their research advisors.
- Concerns about inequities in work expectations and/or funding opportunities.
- Disagreements with or misunderstandings of university policy/procedure.
- Cultural conflicts.
- Concerns about unethical or inappropriate behavior.

Ombuds Officer Services

When a visitor comes to the office with an issue of concern, this is considered a case. If the Ombuds Officer sees a visitor a number of times about the same issue, this is recorded as a single case. In the example, we track the number of visits for each case. Meetings can include multiple individuals.

In this report, we focus on (1) demographics, (2) the person with whom a student reported having a concern, and (3) the issue of concern. Sometimes visitors reported that they had concerns with more than a single person or issue. In these cases, we included the primary person involved and the primary concern. We present data for 2020-2021.

Visitor Statistics (2020 – 2021)

For 2020-2021, Ombuds Officers met with 83 visitors: 31 in the Fall, 38 in the Spring, and 14 in the Summer. This is a 38% increase in visits from 2019-2020. Of the 83 visits, all were conducted over zoom with 1 visit completed by phone. The Ombuds Officer made an average of 1.13 contacts per visitor ($SD = .44$) and spent an average of 59.58 minutes on each case ($SD = 30.65$).

Demographics

The majority of visitors to the Ombuds office were men and Non-Hispanic White students. Exhibit 1 provides detailed demographic information of the visitors, as well as the corresponding proportion of graduate students at the university during Fall 2021.

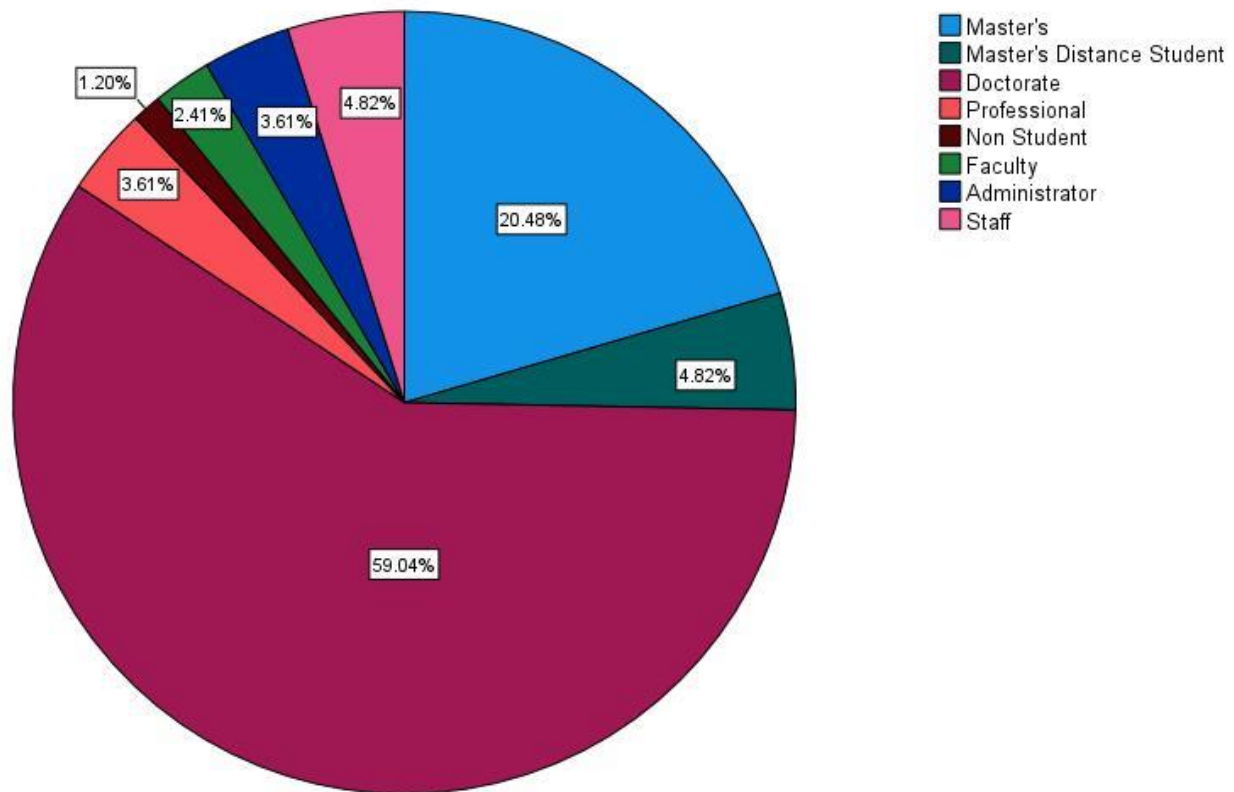
Exhibit 1. Visitor Demographics

	Percent	Percent at TAMU
Gender		
Women	47.6%	47.6%
Men	52.4%	52.4%
Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.3%	.2%
Asian/Asian American	15%	7.8%
Black, Non-Hispanic	7.5%	4.5%
Hispanic/Latino	16.3%	13.7%
International	31.3%	26.0%
White, Non-Hispanic	48.8%	41.8%

Visitor Role

As seen in Exhibit 2, the majority of the visitors were doctoral students followed by master's students.

Exhibit 2. Visitor Roles at the University



Professional students are students enrolled professional degree programs (JD, MD, DDS, DVM, PharmD).

Master's distance students are students enrolled in a distance education program. The university defines a distance education program as "a program in which a student may complete more than one-half of the semester credit hours required for the program through a combination of distance education courses."

(Source: <https://distance.tamu.edu/>)

Visitor College Affiliation

Exhibit 3 provides information about visitors' college affiliations. As a point of comparison, the same exhibit includes the relative proportion of students from that college in Fall 2021.

A majority of Ombuds Office visitors came from two colleges: Engineering and Agriculture and Life Sciences.

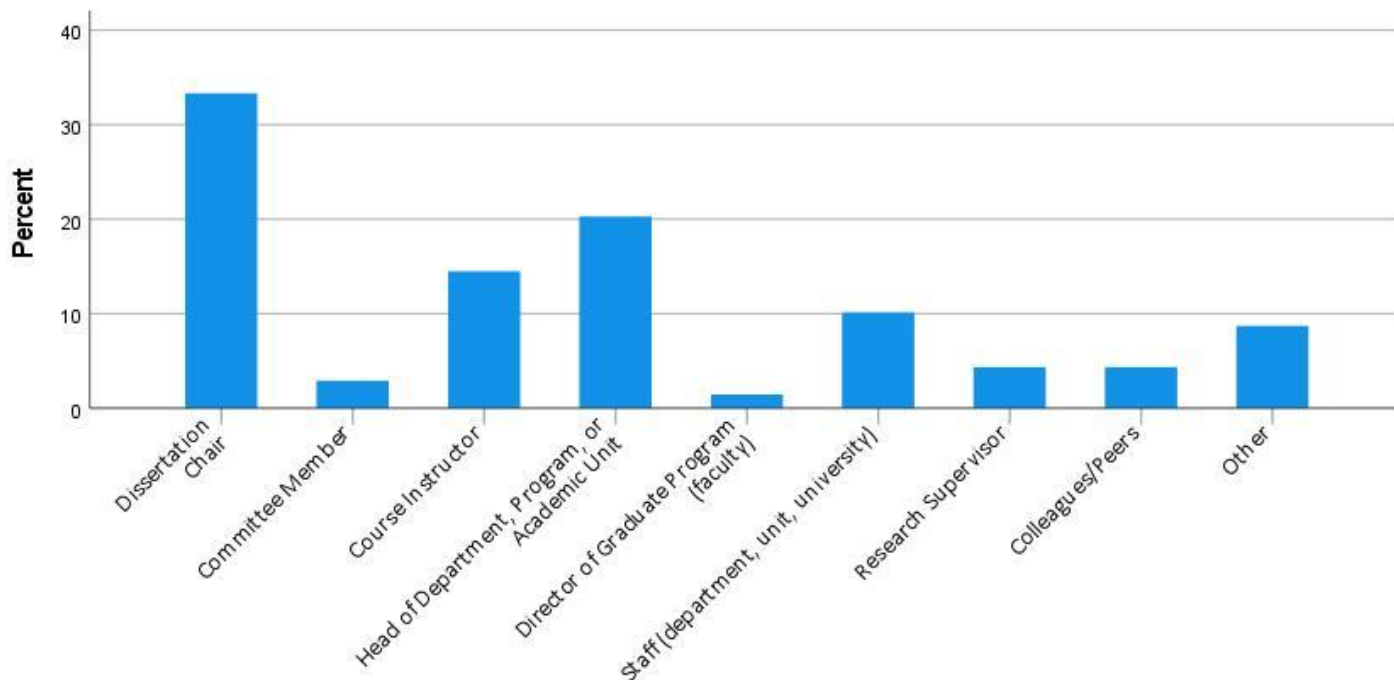
Exhibit 3. Visitors by College

College	Percent	Percent at TAMU
Agriculture and Life Sciences	19.3%	7.4%
Bush School	0%	3.4%
Mays Business School	6%	7.8%
Education and Human Development	6%	9.9%
Engineering	30.1%	24.9%
Geosciences	4.8%	2.2%
Liberal Arts	12%	5.0%
Architecture	3.6%	4.5%
Law	1.2%	7.1%
Public Health	2.4%	2.9%
Science	6.0%	7.3%
Veterinary Medicine and Biological Sciences	0%	5.9%
Dentistry	3.6%	2.7%
TAMUG	2.4%	1.0%

Nature of the Visit

Approximately 33% of individuals who visited the Ombuds Office expressed concerns with their dissertation chair. This was followed by conflict with department or program leaders course instructors (see Exhibit 4).¹

Exhibit 4. Primary Source of Concern



Approximately 25.3% of visitors shared concerns about receiving unfair or disrespectful treatment (see Exhibit 5). Disrespectful treatment concerns involved faculty, primarily dissertation chairs, being disrespectful towards their advisees. Visitors provided examples such as name calling (e.g., stating the student is stupid) or displaying unprofessional behaviors (e.g., yelling, slamming doors, blocking students from using university resources).

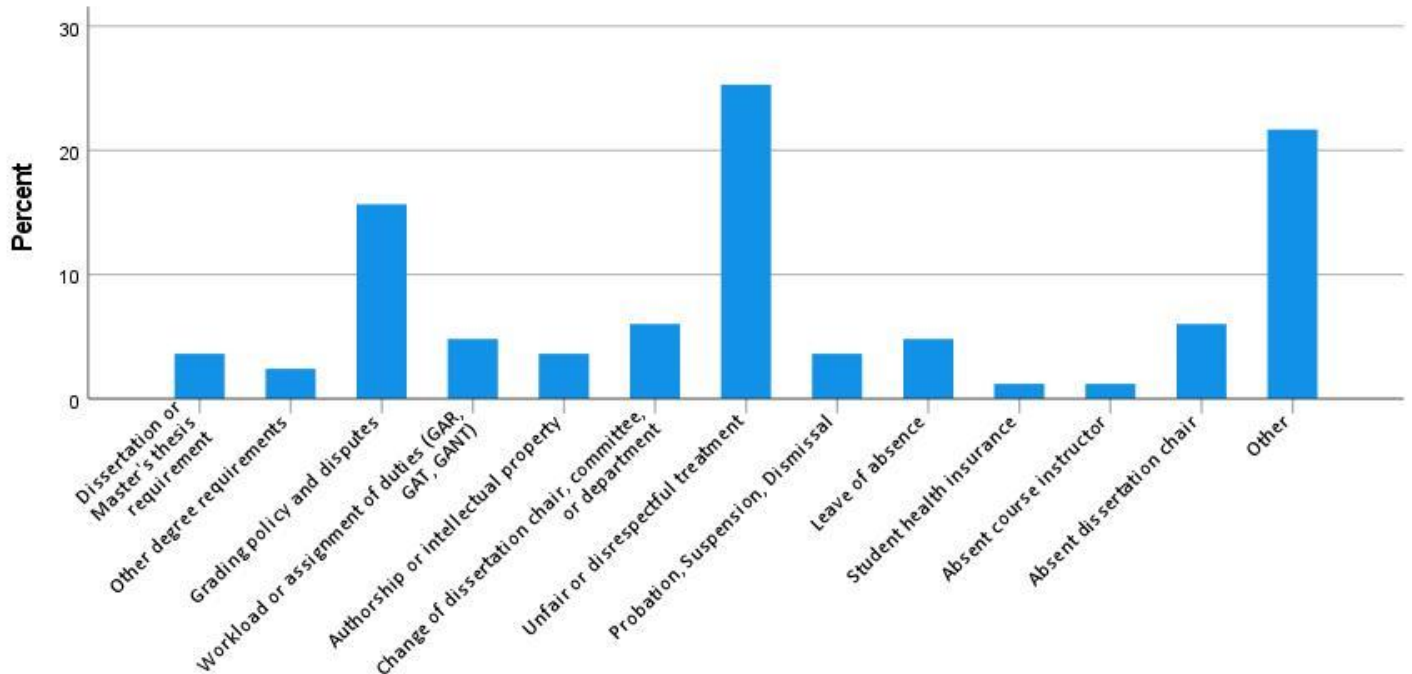
Approximately 15.7% sought assistance regarding grade policy and disputes. Many visitors sought assistance in navigating the grade appeal process outlined in Student Rule 59. Over 15% of visits included issues dealing with the dissertation process such as an absent dissertation chair, desiring a change of dissertation chair due to interpersonal conflict of lack of research guidance, and unclear dissertation requirements.

¹ Other = individuals not affiliated with the university; Dissertation Chair = faculty advisor or major professor; Professor/Faculty = a faculty member not the student's instructor or a member of student's graduate committee; Research Supervisor = individual who supervises a student's work tasks related to research projects, not faculty/dissertation advisor (e.g., lab supervised by postdoctoral fellow or clinical faculty).

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For the Other category (21.7%), the nature of the visit was primarily from administrators and staff seeking consultation on a graduate student issue. Consultation included guidance on grade appeals and annual review of student progress.

Exhibit 5. Nature of Visit



Mandatory Reporting

Following Texas A&M System Regulation 08.01.01, the Ombuds office submits reports to the Department of Civil Rights & Equity Investigations (CREI) if visitors provide information about alleged discrimination, harassment, or related retaliation. For 2020-2021, 14 reports were submitted to the CREI.

Nature of Visit by Gender, Ethnicity, and College

Of all female visitors to the Ombuds Office, 17.6% expressed conflict with their dissertation chair followed by conflict with departmental or academic program leadership (8.8%). Male visitors reported similar conflicts at 16.2% and 11.8%, respectively.

For White (17.9%), Latino (7.5%) and international students (33%), the top issue brought to the Ombuds Office was conflict with their dissertation chair. For Asian/Asian American students, the primary source of conflict was with university staff (4.5%). Black students' primary source of concern was conflict with departmental or academic program leadership (3%).

Both men and women's top concern presented to the Ombuds Office was receiving unfair and disrespectful treatment (11% and 13.4%, respectively). The second top concern for both men and women was grading policy and disputes (8.5% and 7.3%, respectively).

The top concern for White (16.3%) and Latino (5%) visitors was unfair and disrespectful treatment. Black students primary concern when visiting the ombuds office was discussion of taking a leave of absence (2.5%). Asian/Asian American students primary issues presented were on graduate assistantship workload (2.5%) and assistance with changing dissertation chair or committee members (2.5%). International students primary concerns were grade disputes (23%) and unfair and disrespectful treatment (15.4%).

Issues of receiving unfair and disrespectful treatment were the top concerns brought by students in the following colleges: Liberal Arts (4.8%), Agriculture and Life Science (6%), Science (3.6%), and Geosciences (3.6%). For visitors from the College of Engineering, the primary issues presented was grade disputes (8.4%) This was followed by issues of receiving unfair and disrespectful treatment (3.6%).